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The (Un)Changing Academy

Deborah E. Hunter¹

By the time readers are holding this anniversary issue of *The Vermont Connection* in their hands, the flower bulbs I planted on this autumn day may be in full bloom. My hope is to transform a barren piece of earth into a beautiful landscape rich in color and scent. Whether these delicate yet hardy bulbs, with all their potential for future glory, survive the coming Vermont winter is a mystery that won't be solved until next spring. Many factors threaten these vulnerable plants: the rummaging of hungry deer, the scavenging of sightless moles, or the shifting of earth by frost heaves. These predictable hazards as well as other unexpected perils are anticipated by gardeners, those optimistic souls who nonetheless plant and tend their plots with hope in their hearts that a more bountiful and beautiful day lies ahead.

Those of us who call the Academy our home are similarly alert to the predictable yet wondrous seasons that signal changes in academic life. Known to us all are the chills and comforts of the pendulum swings that mark times of economic plenty, public support, student activism, curricular reform, and campus unrest. With wisdom born of experience, we grow accustomed to the painstaking delay in discovering whether or not our labors each day, semester, or year will bear fruit. Unlike workers in a factory who can witness the swift manufacture of a product as it rolls off the assembly line, student affairs professionals, like gardeners, must wait and wonder whether today's efforts will reap desired results. Early in each of our careers we are rudely awakened to the hazards that impede our efforts: the pitfalls of campus politics, the complications that accompany student development, and the injustices that plague our interactions. Further, we are haunted by the budding realization that many of the social ills we seek to remedy on our campuses have been tackled before and that those previous efforts were met with painfully slow, if any, progress.

When I was asked by my Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration (HESA) faculty colleagues ten years ago to craft a seminar recounting the history of higher education, I knew that presenting both the Academy's past and its potential would be key to sparking our students' insights and commitments. Before these new professionals became jaded by the stubborn ways in which the Academy resists change, they needed to realize how the Academy has often stood on the vanguard of social progress. Before their professional experiences fueled cynicism about the Academy's commitment to social justice, they needed to know what had been tried before and what societal forces united to hinder desired change. Thus was born the idea for the HESA course EDHI 363: *The (Un)Changing Academy*, now required for all of the graduate students in The University of Vermont's graduate program in HESA. Central to the course is an examination of the tension between constancy and change throughout the Academy's evolution and how the deficiencies and dissatisfactions of the past are embodied in our present structure in higher education: multiversities, public and private liberal arts colleges, technical schools, community colleges, and cyberspace campuses. Each of these types of institutions represents the hopeful expression of past discontents with the traditional college. Alas, many of these tensions continue unresolved. And so, unanswered questions continue to haunt our campus communities: For whom does the Academy exist? What work is to be done? What principles do we hold dear? What is to be the relationship between the Academy and society?

Each fall I greet eager first-year HESA students enrolled in *The (Un)Changing Academy*. These individuals represent the success stories of the Academy: those who persisted, excelled, graduated, gained admission to graduate school, and aspired to careers in higher education. As our semester unfolds and we uncover the Academy's stories of the past, these students, often armed only with their own happy undergraduate experiences to draw from, are painfully awakened to the ugly human struggles that have historically been manifest on college campuses nationwide. Yet, the role of the professor is not simply to inform, but to inspire. Therefore, the message professed in our classrooms cannot solely be, "this is what you must know," but also, "this is where you can make a difference." Together we can explore what we most value about social justice, goodness, compassion, and learning. Armed with an awareness of what makes for effective change, we can be alerted as to what to expect along the way. Bolstered by a faith in what is possible, a commitment to uphold our highest principles, and a trust that together we can make a difference; we can create a brighter future. Those are the seeds of change that we will help take root.

Deborah E. Hunter is the Coordinator of UVM's HESA Program and has been on the faculty since 1985. She lives in Moretown, Vermont with her husband, twin eight-year-old sons, and a barnful of farm animals.